

VZCZCXRO8003
PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHRH #0625/01 1061447
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 151447Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8198
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH PRIORITY 9491

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 RIYADH 000625

SIPDIS

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PASS TO DRL FOR JLIEBERMAN, G/IWI FOR ANDREA BOTTNER,
NEA/PPD FOR WALTER DOUGLAS, AND NEA/ARP FOR RJACHIM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/15/2018

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: PROFILE IN REFORM: NASCENT WOMEN'S RIGHTS GROUP
STRUGGLES TO CONTINUE MOMENTUM

REF: A. 06 RIYADH 9157

[B](#). 07 RIYADH 2024

[C](#). 07 RIYADH 2532

[D](#). 07 RIYADH 580

[E](#). 07 JEDDAH 498

[F](#). 06 RIYADH 5110

Classified By: Consul General John Kincannon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: Founded by Wajeha al-Huwaider and Fawzia al-Ayouni in August 2007, the Society for Protecting and Defending Women's Rights (the "Society") has quickly become one of the most active and important rights advocacy groups in Saudi Arabia. Coordinating campaigns in the local community, sending petitions to the royal court, and garnering media coverage through print, television, and Internet, the Society has helped focus international attention on the condition of Saudi women, and in the past year has arguably done more than any other grassroots organization to spark continued debate on women's rights in the Kingdom. Despite this positive momentum, the group faces severe challenges and its continued existence as an organization is tenuous. Intimidation by the SAG and Saudi public, familial problems faced by group members, and a Saudi female society perhaps unready for reform all threaten to stop the progress of this nascent organization. END SUMMARY.

FOUNDING AND ONGOING EFFORTS OF THE SOCIETY

[2](#). (C) The Society for Protecting and Defending Women's Rights was created in August 2007 when women's rights activist Wajeha al-Huwaider moved back to Saudi Arabia from Bahrain (Reftel A) and joined forces with fellow long-time activist Fawzia al-Ayouni in an attempt to provide a framework for their separate individual efforts. With al-Huwaider providing much of the energy, and al-Ayouni providing the organizational mindset, the two announced the group's founding on highly trafficked Arab human rights websites, including <http://member-alhewar.info/> and www.aafaq.org. To focus the Society's efforts for the short-term, the two women chose driving as the first issue platform. To push this issue they began by collecting signatures for a petition demanding the right to drive for women. In announcing its existence and first campaign, the Society quickly gained two Jeddah-based members, Ebtihal Mubarak, a reporter for English-language newspaper Arab News and 2007 State Department Foreign Press Center Reporting Tour participant, and Haifa Usra, a divorced mother whose personal hardships pushed her to become involved. On the 11th day of Ramadan - also Saudi National Day (September 23) - the group of four presented a petition of 1,100 signatures to King

Abdullah, gaining wide coverage, both locally and internationally (Reftel B).

13. (C) Since its first petition, the Society has succeeded in staying in the media spotlight through both group campaigns and individual member efforts. In November, Society members met with the activists of the November 6, 1990 Riyadh driving demonstration in an unpublicized gathering in Riyadh. This meeting, on the anniversary of the Riyadh demonstration, served to further the group's name and added momentum to the women's rights movement. Throughout local coverage of the Qatif rape trial (Reftel C), as well as in media reporting of the ongoing forced divorce case of Fatima and Mansour al-Timani (Reftel D), Fawzia al-Ayouni has played a key role. In support of the appeal and of "Qatif girl" lawyer Abdulrahman al-Lahem, al-Ayouni regularly attended court sessions and was frequently quoted in the press. Meanwhile, she has regularly visited Fatima al-Timani throughout the divorce proceedings and continues to call attention to the case. Al-Huwaider has spread the Society's message on television, including interviews discussing women's rights on al-Arabiyya and al-Hurra networks.

4 (C) The Society sent a second petition of 1,000 names to King Abdullah on January 1, 2008. In addition to collecting signatures electronically, names were gathered in true "grassroots" style, with group members approaching people in malls and cafes, informing them of the Society's efforts and asking for their support. These efforts resulted in the early 2008 addition of two new members, Jeddah-based businesswoman Samira al-Bithar, and Dammam-based writer Dima al-Hajri. The group's grassroots activity has also taken the form of speeches at forums hosted in private homes, a popular intellectual pastime in a country where civil society is

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largely prohibited. On March 7th, International Women's Day, al-Huwaider posted on Youtube website a video of herself driving in a rural area of Saudi Arabia. This was the second video posted by the group on the website, the first being an unsuccessful November 2007 attempt by al-Huwaider and al-Ayouni to apply for a Saudi driver's license. The driving video, which as of mid-April had been viewed more than 120,000 times, was accompanied by a petition, sent to Minister of Interior Prince Naif, of 126 Saudi women with driver's licenses in other countries. This March effort once again brought the group significant international press.

15. (C) In March, the Society decided to shift gears and create a second issue platform focusing on the abuse of women in Saudi society - recognized by many as a growing problem (Reftel E). For the first campaign on this issue, the Society plans to create short videos in which women give statements describing the abuse that they have personally suffered. The group will then push to have these first-person accounts covered by mass media. These videos will also be posted to the group's website, set to be unveiled by the end of April. The group's underlying message in this second platform, beyond ending abuse, is to advocate for the right of a woman to be her own legal guardian (NOTE: The group decided against making guardianship the overt goal of the second platform because it believes that ending abuse is an easy idea around which to unite, while female guardianship is significantly more contentious. END NOTE). The group will continue to work on the issue of driving, collecting signatures and sending petitions every time it reaches 1,000 names. Likewise, the group is hoping to collect more video of women outside the Society driving in Saudi Arabia, to broaden the campaign and remove Society members from the limelight, while still maintaining public pressure. Al-Huwaider commented to PolOff that "the Saudi government does not want to turn us into heroes." She believes that by involving non-Society women in the public campaign, the government is able to move in a reformist direction without this progress being credited to the efforts of a small group of activist women.

DESPITE MOMENTUM, GROUP FACES SEVERE CHALLENGES

¶16. (C) Although it has continued to spur the debate on women's rights both inside and outside of Saudi Arabia, the Society continues to face very basic challenges to its existence. The SAG remains ever-vigilant to the actions of grassroots reform efforts, and is quick to intervene. This has been well illustrated during Wajeha's career of activism (Reftel A), and the group has reason to believe that it is continuing today in the case of Ebtihal Mubarak. Mubarak has not been in contact with the group since January, ending all communications without explanation (NOTE: The March petition of 126 names would have been significantly larger, as it was Mubarak who headed that effort and had reported to the Society having collected many more signatures before ending contact. END NOTE). Given how the relationship was severed, and Ebtihal's status as a single woman in her late-20s, working for a high profile newspaper, the Society believes that SAG pressure caused her to end her contact with the organization (NOTE: PolOff was in continued contact with Mubarak during the December coverage of the Qatif rape appeal, during which Mubarak became unwilling to use her cell phone to discuss the case as she was sure it was being monitored by the SAG. END NOTE). Meanwhile, Fawzia al-Ayouni has turned down repeated requests by USG officials for a meeting. Post has been told that she and her husband, democracy reformer Ali al-Dumaini (Reftel F), were advised by the SAG not to meet with USG officials.

¶17. (C) In addition to SAG intimidation, messages in the public sphere are also of concern. After each new campaign and the following media flurry, conservative websites such as al-Saha fill with comments denouncing the actions of the group as contradicting Islam and encouraging action against the women. For example, following the March driving video, Nejd-based Sheikh Ibrahim al-Dubian called for violent action against al-Huwaider on al-Saha website, forcing the activist to respond on Aafaq website by saying that if any harm were to befall her, it would be directly attributable to the Salafi sheikh.

¶18. (C) The group's tenuous future also comes from considerable uncertainty in the personal lives of its members. Haifa Usra, who has provided a great deal of the energy and legwork for the multiple name collection

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campaigns, has recently moved with her 12-year-old son from Jeddah to Dhahran to escape what she describes as long-term abuse suffered at the hands of her mother, father, and ex-husband. She is currently without a job, living in the house of al-Huwaider, and facing the possibility that her father, as her guardian, will force her to return to Jeddah, or that her ex-husband will attempt to take their son. Dima al-Hajri, who participated in the Department's Rosa Parks Liberties Program in 2007, faces the prospect of her activities being severely limited by her conservative older brothers, and is hoping to soon emigrate to Canada. Al-Hajri, who is divorced, had enjoyed great liberty to pursue her activism while under the guardianship of her father. Due to her father's recent passing, al-Hajri's brother is now her guardian, and he does not support her activities. Additionally, group co-founder Wajeha al-Huwaider is hoping to join a one-year program at Yale University in fall of 2008. The program would allow her to be closer to her two sons, both studying in suburban Washington, DC, and though she would plan to continue her activism, distance will no doubt make it more difficult to continue coordinating campaigns in Saudi Arabia.

BUT WHAT DO SAUDI WOMEN WANT

¶9. (C) Perhaps the most difficult question to assess is the opinion of the average Saudi woman toward the group's efforts and goals. A poll published in the Al-Yaum newspaper on April 8, 2008 seemed to provide a strong statement against the efforts of the Society. The poll, part of a study commissioned by the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) showed that 95 percent of Saudi females reject the idea of women driving, as well as the idea of Saudi women studying abroad without a male guardian, and women mixing with men in the workplace. The poll involved 400 women of varying ages. In the same article, Dr. Mohamed al-Zalfa, the Shura Council member who in 2005 proposed lifting the ban on women driving, denied the idea that the Shura Council has discussed a proposal allowing women to drive.

¶10. (C) Though these poll numbers are highly suspect and would seem to represent a political message authored by the SANG more than any serious effort to understand the opinions of Saudi women, the Society members themselves admit that they likely do not represent a majority of Saudi females. The group members, however, argue that this is an issue of education, both social and academic, and the fact that many Saudi women do not desire to drive or work with men does not mean that the country should deprive those women that want these rights of the opportunity. Likewise, the Society is firm in the belief that its job is to change the reality of the Saudi female, not to reflect current opinion.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) The Society for Protecting and Defending Women's Rights has shown a continued ability to command both local and international headlines, provoking conversation, both positive and negative. The group is neither optimistic nor pessimistic, but balanced in its collective outlook and understanding of the effect of its actions. Al-Huwaider explained to PolOff that she is encouraged by the reformist streak of leaders such as Makkah Governor Prince Khalid al-Faisal. She was equally discouraged when Fawzia al-Ayouni approached the daughters of Prince Talal to request their support for the driving petitions, only to be told that the Princesses would not support a "Shi'a effort" (NOTE: Al-Huwaider is the only Shi'a of the group's members, but a number of the females who signed the petition were Shi'a women of Eastern Province towns like Safwa, widely considered more liberal than other areas of Saudi Arabia. END NOTE). Not mentioned above, but clearly integral if the group hopes to continue - or even expand - activity, is a source of continued funding. Until now the group has been self-funded, and as the SAG does not look highly upon philanthropy toward grassroots activist campaigns, the group has few prospects of finding a benefactor in the short-term. Despite the innumerable obstacles, the Society continues to preach its message of women's rights while refining its tactics for gaining, maintaining, and manipulating both national and international attention. More than any other citizen group over the past year, their actions have forced the continued debate of this important issue.

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BIO NOTE

¶12. (C) Society co-founder Fawzia al-Ayouni is an internationally known and respected human rights advocate. Relative to Wajeha al-Huwaider, al-Ayouni takes a slightly more conservative and controlled approach to advocacy, much less likely to form a one-woman march than she is to speak forcefully through established media. The head of the Women's Chapter of the Dammam Literary Club, al-Ayouni is in her 60s and is a retired teacher. As with many who make up

what is termed as the "liberal" movement (for example, Najeeb al-Khunaizi), al-Ayouni was formerly part of Saudi Communist movement, along with her husband Ali al-Dumaini. Her relationship with this now defunct group often leaves al-Ayouni and al-Huwaider vulnerable to being derisively typecast by conservative critics as "the Communist and the Shi'a." In late March 2008, al-Ayouni traveled with noted human rights activists from other Gulf states to visit with various institutions of the European Union, including the European Parliament and European Council, and discuss possible use of European mechanisms to support human rights in the region. The trip was coordinated by Nabil Rajab of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and was billed by Rajab as the first ever visit to Brussels of a delegation of Gulf Arab human rights activists.

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